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The costs are heavy for Israel

By MAX LERNER

FROM the start, the Pollard-Eitan espionage affair had a potential for mischief making between two nations locked in a close friendship.

In Pollard's case the alleged betrayal of the secrets of one's country, even to benefit an ally like Israel, remains an intolerable breach of fealty.

As for Israel, by whatever involvement its officials may have had, it hurt itself badly in American eyes. Prime Minister Shimon Peres was wise to limit the damage by his apology, and by giving American investigators access to the two embassy officials who had been recalled.

Every act of espionage carries coils of complicity with it in its shadowy history. What makes this one more impenetrable than most was the paradox — as well as the folly — of spying on Israel's prime ally and protector.

It will be a miracle if the affair leaves Israel's whole array of high security and political officials unscotched.

It is hard to unravel the tortured psychology of incentives in the case of the Israelis who ran the spy operation, or who knew about it — or chose not to know.

Even assuming that Israel got some highly usable information about Soviet weapons systems at the disposal of Israel's enemies, it

came at the prohibitive cost of imperiling the American alliance. The spymasters, as well as the spy, were serving their respective countries shabbily.

One clue to the crazy paradox is Israel's pervasive historical concern about security.

Amos Perlmutter, an American political scientist with his roots in Israel, has written a deeply analytical political history, which he calls "Israel: The Partitioned State" (Scribners). I prefer to see Israel no longer as a partitioned but as a beleaguered country.

The problem from the start was the circle of enemies around the infant state whose birth crib was a multiple battlefield.

The true founder of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, had a genius for state-making. But the core of survival for him was the state that could ferret out its enemies by its intelligence forces, and raise an army and an air force to smite them.

He also started the principle of instant retaliation so that the remnants of a persecuted people, who had felt alone everywhere, would shed their sense of helplessness.

Israel is known worldwide for the subtlety of its intelligence operations, and the CIA has often made use of them.

There is scarcely a high

official in Israel's history who didn't at some point, at briefer or greater length, win his spurs in Israel's covert operations.

This is what makes the Pollard-Eitan affair so potentially explosive while the Israeli and American investigations are trying to discover who came to know what, when, how and from whom.

A beleaguered nation, whose leaders have had to learn the ways of covert operations to survive, may have to pay a price for that hard-won knowledge. The danger is that it will come to see the covert not only as a bitter necessity on extreme occasions but as a constant way of life for the state itself.